

Summary Thoughts on Immigration Policy

JOHN H. TANTON, M.D.

*There are a thousand hacking at the branches
of evil to one who is striking at the root.*

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, I*,
“Economy,” 1854

Thoreau nicely illustrates for me the virtue of working on population—and hence immigration—topics as an approach to the many human problems affected by population growth and distribution. It is striking at the causes rather than hacking at the effects.

I. THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

After twenty-plus years of studying and working on the immigration question, I believe that virtually all of its points can be boiled down to three fundamental questions, provided one is not a border anarchist, that is, one who feels that the U.S. agencies now combined as the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, plus the Drug Enforcement Administration should be disbanded, and that people and goods should be able to move across national boundaries without any regulations. When pressed, very few people hold this position.

The three fundamental questions are:

1. How many people shall we admit each year?
2. Who gets the visas, out of the huge pool who would like to receive them? What should the criteria be for choosing?
3. How are the rules going to be enforced?

If one wishes to debate immigration policy, answers to these three questions should be attempted, complete with a rationale for positions taken on each of them.

II. THE THREE STAGES OF THE DEBATE

When Roger Conner and I started the Federation

for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), we theorized that there would be three stages to the debate on immigration policy:

1. The Statue of Liberty phase.

Here, whenever the immigration topic comes up, recitation of Emma Lazarus’s sonnet is considered a sufficient answer.

2. The Caveat phase.

In this stage, thoughtful people begin to see some problems, but feel they need to excuse their interest by interjecting such phrases as, “I’m not a racist or xenophobic, but...” They would then state the particular problem. This seems to be the stage we are currently in.

3. Open Discussion.

In this mature stage of the immigration debate, people will be able to discuss the issue as a legitimate public policy, without first excusing themselves.

III. THREE WAYS TO CONTROL ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

1. Measures within the U.S.

This involves apprehending people once they have entered illegally, or overstayed legal visas, and removing them from the country. There are many difficulties with this approach, including those of civil liberty. However, some of this work is required if we are not going to have a situation where illegal entrants are “home free” once they are inside the U.S.

2. Measures at the borders, ports, and embassies.

A much better approach is to prevent illegal entry in the first place. This is basically a police function and may have some public relations problems. It does avoid the civil liberty questions involved with apprehending persons already in the country.

3. Solving the problem in the country of origin.

This is everyone’s favorite approach. If the push pressures for immigration are the high rates of population growth, the dire economic straits, and political unrest in the countries of origin, solving these problems would take off the push pressure. The difficulty is that we have been trying to do this for decades now, with mixed success, at best.

In the end, it will probably take a combination

John Tanton, who passed away on July 16, 2019, was the founding editor and publisher of *The Social Contract*.

of efforts in all three areas to bring the situation under control.

IV. OUR GOALS

1. End illegal immigration.

If people are going to come to the U.S., they should come openly and above board, and enjoy all the rights and protections of the rest of us.

2. Reevaluate legal immigration.

From time to time, see if legal immigration is supportive of other national goals, such as population stabilization, housing, education, and employment, especially for our most vulnerable workers.

V. FIVE RELATED AREAS

Often separated in public policy discussions, and

kept separate by the organizations working on them, the following five areas are intimately related:

1. Population policy, both at home and abroad.

2. Immigration policy.

3. Language/assimilation/national unity policy.

This is the question of cultural cohesion in a polity.

4. The proper balance of rights and responsibilities among citizens

Our journal, *The Social Contract*, tries, as a matter of editorial policy, to highlight the connections between these areas, and encourages readers to think of them as a whole.

5. Economic policy. How will these other issues impact our economy? And how might economic policies impact them? ■

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Fundamentals

JOHN H. TANTON, M.D.

The conflict over language and immigration policy ultimately can only be understood as disagreement on some fundamental premises and principles. These battles are really skirmishes in a wider war of ideas. Yet these underlying points seldom are explicitly mentioned. Anyone wishing to pursue this concept will find Thomas Sowell's book, *A Conflict of Visions* [NY: William Morrow & Co., 1987], especially Chapter 2, to be illuminating.

Here are some of my basic beliefs and principles as pertains to the immigration and language issues. These perforce influence the positions I take on the issues as a whole and their component parts. I believe the intellectual opposition generally holds opposing views on the first eight points; on number nine they agree, while FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform) and (what is now) ProEnglish seem to disagree.

1. I believe we live in a world of limits and boundaries, however difficult it may be to exactly pinpoint these. I am not a cornucopian. One of mankind's most serious problems is the continuing increase in human population, now running at 90 million per year, 250,000 per day, 10,000 per hour, 170 per minute. This expansion colors virtually all human concerns, ranging from the prevention of global war to local solid waste disposal. It provides one of the key driving forces behind international migration. My chief immigration policy concern is the limitation of numbers

to allow U.S. population to stabilize, thereby limiting our nation's draw on our own and the world's resources.

2. I believe that the nation-state has a continuing valid role in the world, even as there is a role for state and local government, and for some form of worldwide quasi-governmental mechanism (perhaps the UN?) to deal with transnational problems (such as global warming, acid rain, and international conflict). I believe that the concepts of national borders and national sovereignty are both legitimate and essential, and that to hold this position is neither nationalistic nor xenophobic. Nor am I xenophilic.

3. I hold to the metaphor of the melting pot, not of the salad bowl. Our national motto of *E pluribus unum* expresses it: Out of many, one. This sentiment, proclaiming the development of a new people, was expressed by Israel Zangwill in his play, *The Melting Pot*, and by J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*. The U.S. is a nation, not just a physical address for disparate groups living out their separate lives with limited contact with one another.

4. The proper role of government is to foster integration, assimilation, acculturation, and cooperation, not separatism and division. This statement does not signify any desire to deny or efface difference, but rather emphasizes the need to focus on common ground and shared characteristics.

5. Diversity (carefully defined) is fine and can enrich our lives. Commonality is also fine and can enrich our lives. We must achieve some level of agreement on basic values, goals, and acceptable tools for social management and change. Lobbying is acceptable; pipe bombs are not. Both diversity and commonality have their benefits and limitations. An intelligent balance between the two is needed.

6. I believe that Americans, as well as immigrants, have their own distinctive culture, however difficult of definition it may be (see Alexis de Toqueville and his successors). One prominent American cultural trait is that of philanthropy, which underwrites discussions such as these.

7. *Irredentism* is a relatively new and deleterious force in the U.S. language and immigration policy debates. While the view is perhaps not widely held, the loss of lands by Mexico to the U.S. in 1836 and 1848 is still intensely felt by an undetermined and important group of activists. These feelings are largely confined to persons of Mexican origin, as it was Mexico that suffered the loss. Such memories can last for generations, as innumerable situations around the world will attest. Without ever expecting to put these feelings completely behind us, we must focus on our current problems and present situation and try to move forward from here. There is good reason for the concept of a statute of limitations in the law. At some point, one must move on.

8. Name calling, while politically effective, is not a substitute for reasoned discussion of difficult issues.

9. Immigration and language policy issues are inextricably intertwined, despite the efforts of organizations working on these to keep them separate. For instance, immigration policy sets the stage for language problems by setting overall numbers and hence the size of the assimilative/aculturative task facing a society, or by how seriously it takes the language tests for naturalization, which in turn affects such things as policy on bilingual ballots. Conversely, language problems condition the debate on immigration policy. For instance, consider the current proposal to give points towards immigration for, among other things, already knowing the English language, or the question of whether there should be more diversity and less concentration among language groups in the immigrant stream. Such ties between two public policy areas are normal and legitimate.

My physician's perspective tells me that prevention is better than cure, and that early diagnosis, with concomitant mild treatment, is better than late diagnosis, when more drastic measures will be required, if indeed a

cure can be effected at all. Diagnosis is more difficult and tenuous in the early stages of any malady, when the clues are less certain. Indeed, diagnosis is often more intuitive than strictly scientific. We should aim to "diagnose and treat" any language, or other social problem, in its early stages, when there will, however, be differences among astute people of good will as to whether there are sufficient signs and symptoms to warrant a diagnosis. The way to sharpen one's diagnostic skills in medicine, as well as in social situations, is to study history so that, as Santayana wrote, we are not condemned to relive it; to confer readily with colleagues; and to practice continually to gain experience.

If a diagnosis is agreed upon, the next question is whether outside treatment is needed, or whether the natural healing powers of the body politic can be relied upon. If treatment is needed, how mild, moderate, or drastic should the measures be? Here we must keep in mind the ancient medical principle, *primum non nocere*: First, do no harm. If one can't help, at least try to avoid making things worse.

In medicine, hence, when deciding to treat, one must take into account both the side effects of the treatment, and the severity of the untreated disease. One might accept the immunization for polio, because the risk of serious side effects of the treatment are slight (but not zero), and once the paralytic disease strikes, there is no known way to revivify an atrophied limb. The mild fever and headache that one often gets from taking the attenuated polio virus that provides the immunity is an acceptable price to pay to avoid the disastrous affects of paralytic polio. Nor does one wait until the epidemic strikes to seek the preventative.

In contrast, one might forgo a flu shot, for the consequences of the flue will in most cases pass on with no permanent damage.

I apply these principles to thinking about language and immigration policy questions. Prevent problems where possible; where this is not possible, try to diagnose early and use the most innocuous treatment that will still adequately address the malady. Since in the language field, history provides few if any examples of remedies for established division of a society along language lines (other than mass expulsions, and even genocide, used all too frequently), it behooves us to sharpen our diagnostic skills and to act on the earliest signs of difficulty.

Those doing so must recognize that society generally gives no rewards for preventing problems, and often vilifies those who try to do so. ■

(The final draft of this essay was dated January 13, 1989.)

Among the many virtues I admired about Dr. Tanton was his fearless curiosity, willingness to ask questions that others would quietly avoid, and strength to withstand the attacks from smaller minds that had decreed many of those queries forbidden thoughts. God bless him. ■

—D.A. King, Marietta, Georgia